

The

Ballarat

Naturalist

September 2004



Trailing Goodenia
Goodenia lanata
(Club Logo)

Non-passerine Birds of Eastern North America

Speaker: Patrick-Jean Guay, Ph.D. Student, University of Melbourne

Patrick received funding from the Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne and other organisations to undertake research on Musk Ducks, and is using the Lake Wendouree population as part of his studies. Field assistance has been provided by Carol Hall and John Gregurke, and as a result of this relationship Patrick was invited to speak about the birds of his home area, the Province of Quebec, Canada.

Using PowerPoint, Patrick introduced his topic by illustrating the considerable seasonal contrasts experienced in Canada, from warm summers to colourful autumn colours and the deep snow of winter. As a result of the harsh winters and lack of food, many birds migrate to the southern USA or South America.

Patrick then showed us selected examples of birds from a variety of groups, sometimes comparing their habits and ecological niches with similar species seen in Australia, or relating anecdotes about his own experiences with the birds. The Northern Gannet has different wing patterns from our Gannet, and there are two pelican species, both different in appearance from ours, and which dive on their food like gannets rather than rounding up their prey co-operatively as ours do sometimes.

Waders which we also see here include the Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, Grey Plover and Sanderling—but in Canada they are seen in their colourful breeding plumage. Cattle Egrets also occur—they appear to be self-introduced, having radiated from their origins in Africa to other parts of the world. The pest proportions of the Canada Goose were noted, then we saw several colourful ducks such as the Northern Pintail, Redhead (rather like our Hardhead) Canvasback and Ring-necked Duck.

Birds of Prey were shown, such as the Bald Eagle, Cooper's Hawk, American Kestrel, and Merlin. Turkey Vultures are numerous and use the thermals to gain height and soar, looking for carrion. Ruffed Grouse and Wild Turkey also featured. Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes caused some discussion, then the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon was mentioned—the reasons being overhunting combined with slow breeding.



Great grey owl

Moving on to the nightjars and owls, we were treated to the call of the Whippoorwill—and realised how it got its name! Owls we don't see here include the Snowy Owl which breeds on the ground in the tundra, and is only seen on southern Quebec in winter; the Eastern Screech Owl whose call resembled a horse neighing; the Great Horned Owl and the Long-eared Owl, the latter living in forests. Barred Owls and Saw-whet Owls appeared, and one of the largest owls, the Great Grey Owl. It lives in the northern forests and is totally adapted to hunting voles beneath the snow, hearing their tunneling noises and gliding silently to the snow surface, plunging face down while the talons penetrate the tunnel and fasten upon the vole.



Great horned owl

Woodpeckers are a colourful and interesting group and Patrick was able to play us the very different drumming sounds and rhythms of the Northern Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

Giving a colourful, humorous yet scientific, well-presented talk, Patrick was most enthusiastic, and the more questions were asked the more his extensive knowledge of the birds of the home country became apparent.

(The second half of his talk, *Passerine Birds of North America* was presented to the BOCA meeting the following Tuesday.)

Excursion: Significant Trees North of Ballarat

Leaders: Pat & Bill Murphy

Meeting at our usual point in Creswick Road, 12 members and one visitor (from WA) set out (we were joined by Helen Youngharvey later in the afternoon) at 9.30am on a circuit taking us to interesting trees north of Ballarat planned and executed by our own Pat & Bill Murphy. The sun peeped out from behind clouds most of the day except for an icy blast en route from Clunes to Creswick in mid-afternoon.

In the Eureka Stockade Park we noted a Weeping Pagoda Tree *Sophora japonica* "Pendula" - we are told it is rare in Ballarat and long lived. It is a member of the pea family and native to East Asia. This specimen is a cultivar grafted onto the rootstock of the pagoda tree.

Next in the University of Ballarat SMB campus we examined a healthy example of the Saw Banksia *B. serrata*, native to coastal areas east of Wilson's Promontory. This tree with its striking flowers was planted in 1983 by Elspeth Swan, at the time head gardener at the institution and now an FNCA member.

In Victoria Park we noted a square arrangement of four fastigate English oaks *Quercus robur* "fastigiata"; fastigate means having a conical or tapering outline or having parallel or upright branches (from the Latin *fastigium*—gable top, an accurate description).

Adjacent to the new ex-POW Memorial beside Carlton Street is a tree which formed part of the original cover of the area, a Swamp Gum *E. ovata* var. *ovata*—and now stands sentinel.

Further along Wendouree Parade in the Botanical Gardens is a majestic Tasmanian Blue Gum *E. globulus* subsp. *globulus* growing next to the rockery and pool; this tree is the state floral emblem of Tasmania. As we approached, a Black Duck drake in its element in the pool suddenly flew off and - surprise, surprise - we noted its mate warily thrusting its head out of a hollow 3-4m up the trunk!



E. globulus fruits

To the west of Ballarat is the Avenue of Honour forming the Old Western Highway and near White's Road, Windermere just in private property on the south side is the remains of an old hawthorn hedge with, in the middle, a Snowgum *E. pauciflora* subsp. *pauciflora*. This may be the tallest of the species in this district.

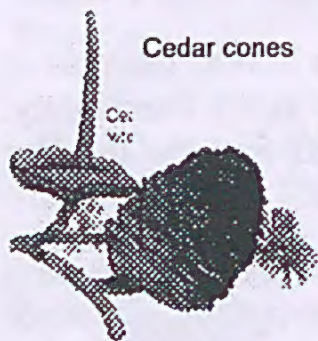
Travelling across country to Learmonth we stopped for lunch on the shore of the now dry Lake Learmonth, recent winter rain only filling a few of its channels. At the rear of the old shire offices in Learmonth is an outstanding example of the Italian Cypress *Cupressus sempervirens*—perhaps 20m in height, its attractive grey-green foliage belying the presence of a dusty entanglement of branchlets within. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Italian Cypress is used by some cultures as a symbol of death and immortality, a foreboding choice by the then civic leaders as new offices opened in Wendouree in 1964.



River Red Gum

Just to the west of Talbot is a tree recorded on the National Trust Register at the Melbourne Herbarium, the so-called Ma-

ternity Tree of the Koories. It is a River Red Gum *E. camaldulensis* of huge girth, mostly rotted/burnt out now but still sprouting fresh leaves from an enveloping mesh of branches.



In the historic Queen's Park of Clunes tall Blue Atlas Cedars *Cedrus atlantica glauca* and a fastigate specimen *C. a. "Fastigiata"* grew side by side, one imagines well watered by the nearby steady and north-flowing Tullaroop Creek (aka Creswick Creek). We observed New Holland Honeyeaters in shrubs in this park.

Final destination for the day was The School of Forestry, Creswick (now part of the University of Melbourne) and the gently sloping wooded gardens of this centre of learning (founded 1863). Resident wit Peter Billing suggested, in his own inimitable way, we might see a deer! Perhaps not far off—certainly reminiscent of deer country for all I know. We did see a blend of many Australian native and introduced species. Trees of note included: Spanish Chestnut *Castanea sativa form*, now widely grown as a park tree; Wheatly/Jersey Elm—rarely seen in Victoria; the thick leathery leaves and warty buds of Grampians Gum *E. verrucata (alpina)*; Spotted Gum *Corymbia maculata* of coastal NSW and SE QLD; Rough-barked Angophora *A. floribunda*; Cedar of Lebanon *C. libani*; cork oaks and a pine tree grown from the seed of the Lone Pine at Gallipoli; palm trees, usually associated with sunnier drier climes.

Lastly in Moore Street another tree from the National Trust Register, a Jeffrey Pine *P. jeffrey* was inspected. There are about 90 species in the genus *Pinus* (family Pinaceae) distributed throughout the world, native primarily to northern temperate regions.

Tony Johns.

Meeting Points

The President welcomed 24 members and visitors.

- SEANA will take out Public Liability Insurance, so Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat will not need to host Little Desert Campout.
- Masterfood Wetlands excursion: 9.30am Tuesday 16 November.
- Library sorted and put in order by Committee and some members on Sunday 8 July
- BEN: Claire Dalman, John Gregurke and Belinda Taylor attended the AGM. John Endacott retired after 8 years as president and Kurtis Noyce was elected. The guest speaker, Ray Thomas, gave an interesting talk on the revegetation work carried out in the Lurg area near Benalla to improve the habitat for native fauna, particularly Grey-crowned Babbler and Regent Honeyeater.

- Canadian Valley Outline Development Plan: Greg Binns and John Mildren attended information sessions presented by Ballarat City Council on a proposed Canadian Valley Outline Development Plan. Twelve issues papers and a draft response were tabled. The key feature of the draft response was the retention and enhancement of vegetation areas and corridors with strategies given to achieve these.
- Meeting moved that the response to the Canadian Valley Outline Development Plan be forwarded to the Ballarat Council. Moved Pat Murphy, Seconded Avis Barlow.
- Stella Bedggood Memorial Lecture. Posters provided for members to take and display. Courier to be notified. Members requested to provide vegetation for decoration and to bring two plates for supper.
- Mid month excursion organised to Corindhap including Trendys Road for Monday 16th August leaving Ballarat Market Place at 9:30am.
- Information about SEANA camp to Little Desert has been sent out by John Gregurke and some additional letters were distributed to members at meeting.

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Show and Tell

- Claire Dalman: Whole and partly dispersed cone collected from Norfolk Pine at Apollo Bay camp. The pine had a profusion of cones which members had not previously seen. .
- Greg Binns: Newspaper cutting from Margaret Rotheram about Asian House Crow, probably from ship in Geelong. In Asia these birds spread disease and damage crops so bird was being sought but had not been found.
- Brush tailed wallabies have been released at Little River.
- Peter Billings: Courier article about rainforest in Alaska.
- Bob Curtain: Newspaper articles with satellite photos.

Field Reports

- Carol Hall: the Lake has risen to minus 0.6 metres. Rowing and canoeing are possible once again.
- Patrick-Jean Guay: First swan nest observed at north end of Fairyland at Lake Wendouree.

Further to Field Report: On the Tuesday following the meeting, Patrick and John Gregurke surveyed the Lake by canoe and found a total of 7 nests of which 5 were active.....

.....but read on.....

Who's tricked our swans?

Human Hanky-panky on the Lake?

Imagine carrying out a routine survey by canoe, checking on the season's new nests, identifying birds and pairs and counting eggs. One approaches each nest, and the incubating swan stands up in defence of its clutch—but how do you react when on one nest in the central reeds the bird (D33) stands up to reveal.....two Coke bottles!!! Fiercely protective of its "clutch", the swan refuses to be persuaded that it's wasting its time. Cameras are called for, and both film (Carol Hall) and digital (Peter Dalman) records are made.



For the record, D33 is male and was banded as a cygnet in 1999/2000 by Ken Kraaijeveld, University of Melbourne, as part of his post-graduate research with field assistance from us. This individual has not previously bred. Males do a large proportion of the incubating. So far we have not seen a female nearby, but this is not unusual - we were sometimes unable to link mates until the cygnets hatched. Many questions come to mind. Birds have been known to incubate infertile or artificial eggs for weeks past the usual incubation time—in this case 40 days. Watch this space!

Carol Hall.

Dereel-Corindhap-Rokewood Mid-week Excursion

Monday 17 August 2004

The frosty morning followed by sunshine was a contrast to the bleak weather of the previous weekend. A group of four set off to explore the area where the southern edges of the Ordovician plateau border the western volcanic plains.

Orchid leaves are prolific on the sandy soil near Dereel Lagoon. Nodding Greenhood *Pterostylis nutans*, Small Mosquito Orchid *Acianthus pusillus* and one Slaty Helmet Orchid *Corybas incurvus* were flowering beneath the bracken fern. Shallow water covers most of the surface of Dereel Lagoon. A Little Eagle soared to a great height above the lagoon.

We tried to find public land on the east side of Dereel but the present day roads of a housing subdivision did not match our old maps. We look forward to the publishing of a guide to small areas of public land which is being prepared by Ballarat Environment Network. One patch of bushland we walked through had a good canopy of Brown Stringybark, Scentbark and a few Candlebark at lower levels. The understory was sparse. Common Hovea was flowering in a patch of Small Grassrees.

Corindhap Reservoir has remnant Kangaroo Grass, Swamp Gum and Drooping Sheoak. The sheoak is regenerating and some areas have been replanted. Gorse, pines and Cape Tulip are being controlled. Two Wedge-tailed Eagles were seen over the plains, one bird performed an aerial display in a wave pattern.

The wall of Rokewood Reservoir is beached with basalt blocks. River Redgum up to 1 metre diameter have grown through the beaching since it was laid. The spreading branches shade the water's edge. A pair of Black Ducks and a pair of Black Swan were swimming on the dam. A very good stand of Kangaroo Grass links the reservoir to the Rokewood Cemetery. The remnant grassland would be worth a summer visit.

We returned to Ballarat via Devil's Kitchen but the Peregrine Falcon has not begun nesting.

John Gregurke.



